

Sherrie A. Inness, *Dinner Roles: American Women and Culinary Culture*

Mary Drake McFeely, *Can She Bake A Cherry Pie? American Women and the Kitchen in the Twentieth Century*

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Inness, Sherrie A. *Dinner Roles: American Women and Culinary Culture*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2001. 225 pp., cloth, US\$35.95, ISBN 0-87745-762-X; paper, US\$17.95, ISBN 0-87745-763-8.

McFeely, Mary Drake. *Can She Bake A Cherry Pie? American Women and the Kitchen in the Twentieth Century*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000. 194 pp., cloth, US\$24.95, ISBN 1-55849-250-X.

If we are what we eat, if, aside from the need for shelter, food is the most basic staple required by humans, then an exploration of the culture of food — what we eat, how we eat it, who is responsible for preparing it, and the rituals associated with it — must be an effective path through which more broadly encompassing social patterns and priorities may be accessed. From the modest perspective of domestic food preparation and appreciation, the history of the twentieth century can be understood as the evolution of a secondary paradigm — creative performance — related to making and eating meals at home to supplement the first (provision of sustenance). This can be seen through the study of a number of variables.

One is architecture. Over the last hundred years kitchens moved upstairs, out of the basement of affluent homes, but discreetly at first to the back of the house, where odours and mess least imposed themselves on the more formal living and dining rooms. This was a move which also facilitated maternal contact with children playing in the back yard, an important asset since the homemaker rather than the servant eventually assumed responsibility for cooking in all but the wealthiest houses. The kitchen itself became a place in which to enact both guest- and family-related rituals, by virtue of being increasingly linked to the “family room,” a more comfortable and less intimidating environment where guests were permitted to overlook the demands of rigorous etiquette, and relax and enjoy the experience. In many middle-class North American homes, the kitchen has

most recently become the primary zone for interaction: stools positioned against the counter might allow the cook and the cooked-for to communicate while meal preparation takes place, and cooking implements themselves are, more than ever, designed to have aesthetic as well as utilitarian components.

Such proximity reconfigures the kitchen as an optimum setting for the public demonstration of cooking prowess and inventiveness, including the more frequent utilization of what were, until not so long ago, unknown ingredients and techniques. Taking their cue from *The Naked Chef*, or *The Iron Chef*, or even *Two Fat Ladies*, those women, and, increasingly, men, whose task it is to prepare bread to break can use their time in front of the stove as an opportunity for self-expression, for displaying cultural sophistication in the culinary sphere, and for exhibiting social status and abundant disposable income. Lord Burlington showed off what he learned on the Grand Tour by building Chiswick in eighteenth-century England. Today's less extravagant traveller might be granted social capital along such lines by preparing, at home, a Singaporean meal based on Nonya influences, out of ingredients buried in the bottom of a suitcase and snuck past inquisitive canine noses and customs officials. In other words, in an era notorious for its pre-portioned, pre-cooked, pre-packaged, and, judging by the taste and texture, pre-digested convenience foods, in some North American households meal planning and execution represents a choice between a common quick fix and an uncommon luxury, to be indulged in at the expense of precious time as well as money. In other words, eating to live has, to some extent, been differentiated from living to eat.

Two recent books explore dimensions of the evolution in American domestic food preparation during the twentieth century. Sherrie A. Inness's *Dinner Roles: American Women and Culinary Culture* analyses perceptions about cooking on the basis of gendered behaviour and cultural values to be read through food, and provides a fulsome account of the messages and morals inherent in magazines, cookbooks, and other documents

through to the 1950s. Inness has demonstrated familiarity with this area, having edited *Pilaf, Pozole, and Pad Thai: American Women and Ethnic Food* in 2001 and *Kitchen Culture in America: Popular Representations of Food, Gender, and Race* in 2000. Mary Drake McFeely's *Can She Bake A Cherry Pie? American Women and the Kitchen in the Twentieth Century* overlaps somewhat in jurisdiction and focus, and extends the discussion to the end of the century. Especially when taken together, these two books are informative and revealing avenues into the traditions, values and aspirations associated with this pivotal component of human existence.

Dinner Roles clarifies its agenda at the very outset: "The purpose of this book is to provide its readers with a better understanding of how cooking was gendered throughout the first half of the twentieth century and how the gendered relationship of people, food, and cooking in this period did a great deal to keep women in the kitchen, performing cooking-related duties." In terms of the responsibilities of the middle-class, almost-always female homemaker, this meant taking on meal preparation tasks in addition to and in the same spirit as other duties that a good wife was expected to fulfill — cleaning, child-minding and so on. In the popular literature of food, cooking was consistently depicted as an opportunity for the serious and morally-endorsed expression of love and commitment for family by a woman, even at her personal sacrifice.

This theme is consistently illustrated in Inness's book, related, for example, to efforts that were made by women to overcome food shortages during the Depression and the Second World War. An article in *Good Housekeeping* dating from 1940 indirectly added to the challenges of women who struggled to feed their families on a limited budget by demanding ever-creative resourcefulness in stretching available supplies: "Don't let yourself slump and get into ruts. Hunt through your recipe files for old favorites, and be on the lookout for new ones. Meal planning can really be great fun!" Moreover, during the Second World War, notwithstanding the significant contribution of women to the wartime workforce, women were expected to overlook neither their domestic commitments nor their feminine appeal: as Inness puts it, "After all, her husband was not fighting for Rosie the Riveter in grease-stained overalls; he was fighting for an elegant, graceful wife to preside over his dinner table."

Inness further develops her thesis through an examination of related topics. In a chapter on male attitudes towards food preparation, she confirms

the routine association of conventional cooking and the female cook. Men's jurisdiction is confined to domains that relate more directly to their traditional roles as hunters, especially the barbeque and the cooking of slabs of meat like steak; consistent care is taken in texts that deal with men and cooking, to avoid any diminishment in their masculinity as a result of having, temporarily, donned an apron. Is not barbequing for company one manifestation of cooking as public performance, taking place, as it does, away from the gendered space of the kitchen and under the approving eyes of onlookers?

Another chapter on children's cookbooks and related material throughout the period under review also analyses the apportioning of gender roles and gendered behaviour. Girls were consistently informed that they had the best chance of acquiring and appeasing the heart of a husband through his satisfied stomach, and boys were dissuaded from taking any but the remotest interest in how to feed themselves. Interestingly, Inness extrapolates without qualification that today's children are subject to the same differentiation: "Today girls and boys learn at an early age what their 'proper' domestic responsibilities are in areas ranging from cooking to taking out the trash. They learn at an early age that cooking is 'girl's work.'" Such a stance seems unquestionable, for example, when walking through a Toys 'R Us store. On the other hand, feminist mothers of sons would balk at the generalization.

Other chapters look at the food itself. Inness looks at femininity as constructed through such recommended recipes as lend their identities to one chapter's name: "Paradise Pudding, Peach Fluff, and Prune Perfection." The popular food press extolled the virtues of these delicate and fragile confections; being able to concoct them was testament to the ladylike soft touch that the housewife ought daintily to display. Another chapter casts light on messages about ethnicity and race that were projected in terms of recipes for Italian, Chinese or other food brought into American culture by immigrants. One article written in 1927 tars Chinese food and Chinese culture with the same brush:

China being a country of topsy-turvydom, it is not surprising that the Chinese menu contains many fearsome dishes which would turn the stomach of the average foreigner. And, in addition to serving up meat which the white man would not give to his dog, or to his cat, nearly everything is cooked in oil or fat, while an enormous quantity of garlic is added.

Such was the justification, too, to rework exotic recipes and replace ingredients whose flavour was distinctly different or at all strong, so as to accommodate a supposedly more refined and sophisticated Anglo-American palate. By redefining the "foreign" palate in terms of familiar American edibles, a gesture was also being made towards assimilating the taste expectations, not to mention the behaviour, of the original eaters of that food.

That Mary Drake McFeely's book has an overlapping jurisdiction with a very different premise is immediately discernible from the dust jacket's summary:

...From Fannie Farmer to Julia Child, new challenges arose to replace the old. Women found themselves still tied to the kitchen, but for different reasons...Instead of simply providing sustenance for the family, they now had to master more complex cooking techniques, the knowledge of "ethnic" cuisines, the science of nutrition, the business of consumerism, and, perhaps most important of all, the art of keeping their husbands and children happy and healthy.

The assumption here is that cooking is indeed "women's work," and that "perhaps most important of all" is the necessity for the wife to perform the "art" of maintaining the health and happiness of her husband and children. McFeely does acknowledge, further, that "many have questioned traditional assumptions — that cooking is women's work, that love can be measured by time spent in the kitchen." But by holding that question at arm's length — "many" does not necessarily include herself — she seems to confirm her belief that cooking is a task whose gendered association need not automatically be challenged, and that the woman of a household does have the primary responsibility to cater to the nutritional and other sustenance-related needs of her partner and children. McFeely seems to take this position while admitting that "the woman who has to provide a hot dinner for her husband and family every night is effectively tethered to the stove and limited in how much she can accomplish in the outside world... [thereby inhibiting] her ability to act in public." Acknowledging that late twentieth-century women have broken out of the mould and are likely to be "employed" (a word she uses to describe employment outside the home, as if a homemaker is not "employed" within it), she appears to be constrained in her enthusiasm for this change:

she describes such path-breaking women as finding satisfaction "or trying to find it" in their "profession," in a not exactly strong endorsement of the potential of women's gratification in career-based endeavours undertaken outside the home.

McFeely chooses, instead, to approach women's food-related responsibilities in such a way as to draw good out of what even she characterizes as pretty much an inevitable sentence of insatiable family demands and obscurity outside the household. Of course it is possible to achieve a sense of self-worth and pleasure derived from a harmonious and thriving home environment, and this is probably one of the strongest messages in the book. But it is a message soured, unfortunately, by the narrow attitude taken towards gendered domestic obligations in this area. McFeely also seeks to assert that, in accommodating their families, women throughout the century have received valorization and empowerment because "cooking has been an area of work that women controlled, often when they controlled nothing else." Tellingly, McFeely apparently is unaware of the irony of this statement. How could women "control" any other environment, if cooking was the repressive means to keep them effectively within the residential domain, exactly because social expectations — and McFeely's, too, it seems — attributed primary caregiving duties to the principal female adult in the home?

It should be said that by the conclusion, McFeely tones down her position somewhat, remarking, for example, that "Women no longer automatically accept that it is their fate to be responsible for dinner...Many feminists view cooking as a political issue..." She allows, further, that "Some families take turns being in charge of food...Any family member who enjoys cooking may decide to take it on, now that it isn't reserved." But the essential message is sustained:

The women who have stayed [in the kitchen] find pleasure in rattling their pots and pans, developing skills, creating something beautiful and delicious, and feeding people they love. They know the relaxation that comes with kneading bread or stirring soup. They realize they need not resign from the world in favor of cooking. As good subversives, they have made the kitchen a room of their own. If it has sometimes been a trap, it has also been a place to be creative, to have fun, to gather strength for more public work. Men who have crossed the threshold unburdened by the associations of the past have realized these pleasures too.

Again, the perception is that cooking can be an excellent form of self-expression, an articulation of creative and succoring impulses, even an empowering home base out of which women might "gather strength" in some way for "more public work."

It is true that women no longer "resign from the world in favor of cooking" since their paid income in the workforce is more routinely relied upon than ever before during the century, and since more options exist to combine a life outside the home with one that need not sacrifice domestic pleasures. The world in effect has come to the cook, but the reasons for this have only in part to do with McFeely's explanation that women have been able to appropriate the kitchen as "a room of their own" — implying seclusion or, as she believes, subversion.

The transition seems to have at least as much to do with social and cultural changes, which McFeely does not sufficiently take into account, which have reconfigured the kitchen and problematized the roles previously assigned so strongly on the basis of gender. Convenience foods, which allow men to circumvent cooking tasks that their male genes may have excluded them from learning; the transformation of the kitchen to a stage-set with an ever-growing number of techno and cool-looking props appealing to gastronomic experimenters of both sexes; and acknowledgement of the range of possibilities in the nature and makeup of households themselves (husband-wife-and-kids being less a norm than ever, families with single or same-sex parents, adult or adults with no children) have all effectively opened up the kitchen to a new diversity of potential cooks, whether through choice or necessity.

The drawbacks to *Cherry Pie* notwithstanding, it does contain interesting material that deserves scrutiny. Our contemporary Canadian and American, especially urban, lifestyle allows those of us who can afford it to take for granted the possibility of ordering in dinner after a hard day's work. But it is fascinating to hear about a scheme devised by Zina Peirce, in 1868–9, to create a co-op with its own constitution and bylaws, of women who, husbands willing, would share household tasks related to food and clothing and be paid for providing their services. Dinner could then be prepared outside the home, and bought and paid for as necessary. Another subject which McFeely undertakes and is worthy of extended consideration is the role of the radio in the kitchen of the housebound homemaker, both from the context of its importance as a

connection to the outside world, and as a source of recipes and other domestic-related information. A chapter on the rise of healthy eating, beginning with the gospel according to Sylvester Graham in the 1830s, has a shocking quote from the 1962 version of Adele Davis's *Let's Cook it Right* that advocates serving extra calcium in family meals "since radioactive fallout appears to be particularly dangerous to persons whose calcium intake is inadequate."

And the rise of cooking as a performance stimulated by creativity can be charted as well in McFeely's book. Thanks to Julia Child, for example, who differed from her forerunners (Fannie Farmer, Irma Rombauer) in *not* focusing on how to satisfy husbands or survive the daily tedium of putting meals on the table, "Women no longer believed that they should conceal their effort, pretending there was a servant in the kitchen...Some people who had considered cooking only drudgery even began to see its possibilities as a performance art...The pleasure of cooking became a dominant theme."

Taken together, *Dinner Roles* and *Cherry Pie* complement and counterbalance each other in various ways. Both authors are to varying degrees aware of the limitations inherent in each book, in terms of the constituency of cooks being addressed and of how closely the findings can be projected to understand actual conditions. Both authors admit that they target and depict a primarily white, middle-class audience. Inness recognizes that the excerpts she has taken from cookbooks, articles and other sources are prescriptive rather than descriptive, and can thus shed light on how men and women were told how to behave, rather than how they did behave. McFeely does interject her prescriptive material with the actions of actual women (like Zina Peirce) at least to begin to connect it to actual conditions. However, very often, the woman she juxtaposes this material to is herself. McFeely's book is shot through with her authorial intrusions, making this work, in many ways, a projection of her own personal practices and attitudes. For example, in a chapter on "The New American Cuisine at Home" in the 1980s, an assessment of the general conditions favouring the advent of the food-processor is linked directly to McFeely's own preferences:

The food processor (a French invention) pushed the blender into the corner. Many cooks praised it as their indispensable sous-chef, swiftly coping with mundane tasks of chopping, slicing, and puréeing...The cook who failed to achieve a

Zen-like level of contemplation while chopping was delighted to let the machine mince onions... I held out against owning a food processor for years; I really enjoy the task of chopping and mincing with a good knife...Eventually the smell of my old blender motor's overheating in its valiant effort to turn chick peas and sesame paste into hummus drove me to it. I have had to admit that, even with all its parts elbowing the dishes out of the way in the dishwasher, it's a valued ally.

What we take away from this book, finally, is that McFeely herself probably can bake a delicious cherry pie, has had predominantly positive experiences in the kitchen, and was possibly inspired to write in praise of domestic satisfaction as a result of the pleasure derived in

this way. I suppose it's as good a reason as any to write a book, but the self-referentiality of a good portion of the argument suggests a degree of circular reasoning, unfortunately at some cost to the book's credibility as a serious research vehicle. Once the impulse to write was generated, it might well have been better to step back and let more distanced evidence drive the defense of the thesis.

North American eating practices offer a point of departure, exemplified in these two books, to a large variety of cultural traits and practices. The refrigerator door is now open, as it were, to further research and analysis centred on what can be inferred through such investigation. There is, indeed, much food for thought that remains to be profitably explored.

Donald Blake Webster, *Rococo to Rustique: Early French-Canadian Furniture in the Royal Ontario Museum*

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Webster, Donald Blake. *Rococo to Rustique: Early French-Canadian Furniture in the Royal Ontario Museum*. Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 2000. 238 pp.; many colour illus., bib., cloth, \$70, ISBN 0-88854-426-X; paper, \$45, ISBN 0-88854-425-1.

Over the past seventy years, and especially in the period 1963 to 1978, the Royal Ontario Museum has assembled through gift and purchase one of the most comprehensive institutional collections of Quebec furniture. Therefore the publication of a catalogue of its most prominent examples has been eagerly awaited. Donald Webster's *Rococo to Rustique* makes this significant collection accessible through a well-illustrated discussion of the 158 most important works of furniture and architectural trim.

Following an introduction that seeks to provide the wider regional and historical context in which the furniture was produced and used and brief overviews on style and materials, the author devotes the bulk of the volume to the catalogue of the collection. Each object from the collection is illustrated with a large colour plate, the majority of which are sized larger than a half page. For each of these objects Webster provides provenance and acquisition information, addresses stylistic issues, and links the ROM object to other published examples.

While Webster's volume certainly showcases a number of important examples of Quebec furniture, the volume is seriously flawed in terms of its scholarly aspirations and in its presentation. At a time when furniture scholarship has reached new analytical and interpretive levels in the United States and Britain, Webster has taken a rather conservative approach.¹ His introductory essays, which have no footnotes, provide merely a soft background to the collection. There is little attempt to work the furniture and its specific context. For example he notes that church commissions are the foundation of artisanal activity, yet never examines the woodworking traditions at any of the churches and fails to extend the dynamics of transmission to the domestic realm. In England and the United States, Anthony Wells-Coles, Christopher Gilbert, Bill Cotton, Robert Trent, and Robert St George have used church woodwork as an effective way to unlock regional artifactual dialects and recover shop traditions. No such effort is evident in *Rococo to Rustique*. Such field work would have helped Webster pin down the origins of more of the collection.

The emphasis on form and style overwhelms other avenues of analysis. I wanted to know more about some of the cabinetmakers such as Jean Baillargé, Jean LeVasseur, and Louis-Amable Quévillon: the structure of their shops, the type of